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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Abduction of children from northern Uganda

Report of the Secretary-General

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Introduction

1. At its fifty-fifth session, the Commission on Human Rights adopted resolution 1999/43, in which, inter alia, it condemned in the strongest terms all parties involved in the abduction, torture, killing, rape, enslavement and forcible recruitment of children in northern Uganda.

2. The Secretary-General brought resolution 1999/43 to the attention of the Governments of the Sudan and Uganda, by a note verbale dated 12 July 1999, soliciting their comments. Reminders were sent on 8 November 1999.

3. This report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 12 of that resolution.

I. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF SUDAN

4. The Government of the Sudan provided the following information on 18 November 1999.

"The problem of the female students from the Aboki school in Uganda

"The problem of the female students from the above-mentioned school, which arose in 1997 and has on several occasions formed the subject of discussions between Sudanese and Ugandan governmental delegations, consists in the fact that the Lord's Resistance Movement abducted a number of female students from a school run by an Italian church mission. At the time, the Sudanese Government held the following view:

"(i) The criminal acts committed by rebel movements in both countries are the responsibility of the movements themselves, since the Governments do not participate in those acts, are not consulted and are not present at the scene of the events.

"(ii) Both countries are suffering from such barbarous acts, the victims of which are innocent civilians. The Sudanese Government did not hold Uganda accountable, even though all the rural schools in southern Sudan had ceased operating due to the actions of the Garang movement which was receiving support and assistance from the Ugandan Government.

"(iii) This incident occurred in Uganda and the prime responsibility for that operation must be borne by the Ugandan Government and the Lord's Resistance Movement.

"(iv) In accordance with the principle of good-neighbourliness, and in order to prove its good intentions in regard to the establishment of friendly relations, the Sudanese Government will cooperate with the Ugandan side in order to help to solve this problem by urging the Ugandan rebels to return the children to their families, if they have families.

"(v) The Sudanese Government, acting in collaboration with UNICEF, returned a group of children who had fled from the Lord's Resistance Movement rebels to the town of Juba in 1997.

"(vi) In 1998, the Sudanese Government urged the Lord's Resistance Movement rebels to respond to the plea by the Ugandan Government, the school headmistress and the Italian mediator for the release of the students and agreed to this being arranged with the Ugandan side and the Saint Guido group so that they could be released inside Uganda.

"(vii) Before the end of 1998, the Lord's Resistance Movement rebels announced that Ugandan government forces had laid an ambush for its unit accompanying the children near the handover location, as a result of which the initiative was aborted and the Sudanese side was placed in an embarrassing position vis-à-vis the rebels.

"(viii) Since the ambush incident, the Sudanese Government has lost the confidence of the rebels in regard to the question of the female students and the rebels are now talking about leaving the students inside Ugandan territory.

"(ix) The Sudanese Government's position in regard to the manner in which such issues should be addressed is as follows:

"(a) The evil habit of abducting and using children for military purposes is unknown in the Sudan but is a well-known custom in Uganda where it was promoted by Museveni during his coup d'état. The leader of the Lord's Army is a Ugandan who upholds the same concept and John Garang, who is residing in Uganda, has also been afflicted with the same contagion.

"(b) The Sudan has consistently condemned the abduction and use of children for military purposes and has promulgated legislation prohibiting such acts. The Sudan has also announced its willingness to assist and cooperate to the fullest extent. However, the Sudan refuses to allow this issue to be exploited with a view to besmirching its reputation as is being done by Uganda.

"(c) Since both the Sudan and Uganda are suffering from the presence on their borders of common tribes whose customs, cultures and ethnic origins differ from those of the other ethnic groups in the two countries, a certain amount of friction inevitably arises and should be contained within the State concerned.

"(d) Endeavours must be made to ensure that the Governments of the two countries do not fall into the trap set by those groups.

"(e) To this end, there is a need to ensure respect for the values of good-neighbourliness, mutual recognition of the existing political entities in each country, non-interference in the internal affairs of both parties and respect for human rights.

"(f) Joint efforts should be made by both countries through political, economic and social cooperation.

"(g) The Government is willing to look into the outstanding problems between the two countries within this framework."

II. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL SOURCES

5. Information about the situation of the abduction of children from northern Uganda was received from UNICEF and UNDP, and non-governmental organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Save the Children Alliance. A summary of this information follows.

6. Since 1986, in the northern Ugandan districts of Gulu and Kitgum, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), also known as the Lord's Resistance Movement, and other insurgent groups are said to have carried out systematic attacks on the civilian population, abducting thousands of children and forcibly recruiting them into their armed ranks.

7. Throughout 1997 and early 1998, the attacks allegedly intensified, killing hundreds of civilians and causing many more to flee their homes. Thousands of these internally displaced people were moved by the Government of Uganda to "protected villages" which were insufficiently resourced to provide even the minimum requirements for these people, such as shelter, nutrition, sanitation and clean water, and to ensure their safety and respect their human rights.

8. According to Amnesty International, food security in camps remains poor, and local people have consistently complained that the government forces, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), has failed to protect them from assault by the LRA seeking to abduct children and loot food. There are allegations that the UPDF soldiers have themselves been directly responsible for human rights violations against people in camps.[1]

9. There have reportedly been incidents in which unarmed civilians caught in the countryside by UPDF soldiers have been extrajudicially executed, beaten, or raped.[2]

10. However, the International Save the Children Alliance reported that there has been a great reduction in the number of incidents involving the abduction of children in northern Uganda in 1999. In February, an armed group of approximately eight persons reportedly abducted a number of children from a village near Gulu, but since then, the LRA has not threatened the population. Some of the displaced persons have reportedly returned to their homes and have begun to cultivate their fields again. In most cases, children and the elderly have remained in the camps for security reasons.

11. The International Save the Children Alliance reported that children who have escaped or are rescued are taken to two rehabilitation centres in Gulu. According to statistics provided by these centres, up until the first quarter of 1999, a total of 5,837 children had been reintegrated since the beginning of the conflict into their communities after receiving medical treatment,

counselling and education. Estimates as to the number of missing children believed to be in the LRA base camp in southern Sudan vary between 2,000 and 5,000. Many of the children have reportedly been killed either by their abductors or as a result of the conflicts they have been forced to take part in. The sexual exploitation of many of the abducted girls has reportedly led to the birth of approximately 200 babies.

12. It is further alleged that, in contrast to the improved situation in the north of Uganda, armed clashes in the west of Uganda between the UPDF and the insurgent Allied Democratic Front (ADF), which have also involved the abduction and forcible recruitment of children, have intensified since June 1997.

Notes

[1] Amnesty International: "Breaking the circle: protecting human rights in the northern war zone", March 1999.

[2] Ibid.